

REMARKS

The Office Action mailed December 4, 2006 has been carefully considered.

Reconsideration in view of the following remarks is respectfully requested.

Claim Status and Amendment of the Claims

Claims 1-38 are currently pending.

No claims stand allowed.

Claims 1-18 and 21-38 have been amended to further particularly point out and distinctly claim subject matter regarded as the invention. The amendments include replacing all occurrences of "said" with "the." Support for these changes may be found in the specification, figures, and claims as originally filed.

The 35 U.S.C. § 101

Claims 21 - 37 stand rejected under 35 U.S.C. 101 as allegedly containing subject matter which was directed to non-statutory subject matter.¹

The Examiner states,

... As disclosed in the specification of the application, all components recited in the claims that constitute the claimed system are constructed of software program objects and/or instructions ([0012]: "...the component, process steps, and/or data structures..."). Thus, the claimed system is considered a software program containing machine executable instructions, per se (and not associated with any physical structure); therefore, it is non-statutory according to 35 U.S.C 101. For the purpose of further claim analysis under 35 U.S.C. 102 and 103, The Examiner treats Claims 21 - 37 as a computer program containing machine-readable instructions stored on a physical medium for performing the method or steps recited in the claim.²

¹ Office Action dated December 4, 2006, ¶ 2.

² Office Action, pp. 2-3.

The Applicant respectfully disagrees. Claims 21-37 are means-plus-function apparatus claims.

Thus, they must be interpreted under 35 U.S.C. § 112, 6th paragraph. In support of the Examiner's statement, the Examiner incorrectly paraphrases the disclosure found in paragraph 12 of the application as filed. The Examiner is referred to the entirety of paragraph 12, which recites:

In accordance with the present invention, the components, process steps, and/or data structures may be implemented using various types of operating systems, computing platforms, computer programs, and/or general purpose machines. In addition, those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that devices of a less general purpose nature, such as hardwired devices, field programmable gate arrays (FPGAs), application specific integrated circuits (ASICs), or the like, may also be used without departing from the scope and spirit of the inventive concepts disclosed herein.³

Thus the Examiner is incorrect in stating that “as disclosed in the specification of the application, all components recited in the claims that constitute the claimed system are constructed of software program objects and/or instructions.” To the contrary, the specification clearly indicates that embodiments of the present invention may be implemented using various combinations of hardware, software, and firmware. The Examiner is also referred to the arguments made below regarding the 35 U.S.C. § 102 rejection of Claims 21-37, wherein more support is provided for an interpretation of Claims 21-37 under 35 U.S.C. § 112, 6th paragraph. Accordingly, Claims 21-37 are drawn to statutory subject matter. Withdrawal of the rejection of Claims 21-37 under 35 U.S.C. § 101 is respectfully requested.

³ Specification as filed, ¶ 12. (emphasis added)

The 35 U.S.C. § 102 Rejection

Claim 1 stands rejected under 35 U.S.C. § 102(a) as allegedly being anticipated by Microsoft⁴⁵ This rejection is respectfully traversed.

According to the M.P.E.P., a claim is anticipated under 35 U.S.C. § 102(a), (b) and (e) only if each and every element as set forth in the claim is found, either expressly or inherently described, in a single prior art reference.⁶

Claim 1

Claim 1 as presently amended recites:

A method for controlling communications in a system for automatically distributing a software update to a network of devices controlled by an organization, the method comprising:
receiving a first request for available updates from a user interface, the request received by a web module;
processing the first request on the web module;
sending a second request for available updates from the web module to a main module;
placing the web module in a listen state without waiting for a response to the second request;
processing the second request on the main module;
sending a third request for available updates from the main module to a patch module;
placing the main module in a listen state without waiting for a response to the third request;
processing the third request on the patch module, the processing including examining a global update repository including updates from multiple application manufacturers;
sending a first reply with a list of available updates from the patch module to the main module;
sending a second reply with a list of available updates from the main module to the web module; and
sending a third reply with a list of available updates from the web module to the user interface.

⁴ Ref-A: Microsoft's "Concepts, Planning, and Deployment Guide", Microsoft SMS 2003, 10/2003, pp. 72-79 and 130-132.

⁵ Ref-B: "Understanding Patch and Update Management: Microsoft's Software Update Strategy," 10/1/2003.

⁶ Manual of Patent Examining Procedure (MPEP) § 2131. See also *Verdegaal Bros. v. Union Oil Co. of California*, 814 F.2d 628, 631, 2 USPQ2d 1051, 1053 (Fed. Cir. 1987).

The Examiner states,

... Microsoft® discloses a method for controlling communications in a system for automatically distributing a software update to a network of devices controlled by an organization, the method comprising:

- receiving a first request for available updates from a user interface, said request received by a web module;

(The Distribute Software Updates Wizard installed on SMS site servers and Systems Management Control Panel associated with Software update inventory tools/Software Updates Installation Agent installed on SMS clients contain an integrated UI and web module for receiving information from the UI.

Ref-A: Fig. 3.4, page.77: step 3; "The SMS administrator runs the Distribute Software Updates Wizard to view, evaluate, and authorize applicable software updates."

Ref-A: page 131: Systems Management Control Panel Icon: "Clicking this icon displays information about the SMS client software...")

- processing said first request on said web module,

(The Distribute Software Updates Wizard's and Systems Management Control Panel's integrated web modules automatically process information received from their respective integrated UI.)

- sending a second request for available updates from the web module to a main module;

(The Distribute Software Updates Wizard and Systems Management Control Panel further contain an integrated main module controlling the downloading and distribution of software updates.. The integrated main module automatically processes information received from the integrated web module.

Ref-A: page 74: "...the software distribution related tasks..." of Distribute Software Updates Wizard.

Ref-A: page 131: "The General tab shows the discovery data for the computer.")

- placing said web module in a listen state;

(The Distribute Software Updates Wizard's and Systems Management Control Panel's integrate web modules constantly monitor information received at their respective integrated UI as well as patch module.)

- processing said second request on said main module;

(The Distribute Software Updates Wizard's and Systems Management Control Panel's integrated main modules automatically process information received from their respective integrated web module.)

- sending a third request for available updates from said main module to a patch module;

(The Distribute Software Updates Wizard further contains an integrated patch module for downloading and distributing software updates. The Systems Management Control Panel further contains an integrated patch module for discovering software components on the system. The integrated patch modules automatically process information received from the integrated main module.

Ref-A: Fig. 3.4, page 77: step 4; "The Distribute Software Updates Wizard downloads from the Microsoft downloads site the source files for the specified software update."

Ref-A: page 131: "The General tab shows the discovery data for the computer. The Components tab displays a list of components that are installed on the client and the status of each component.")

- placing said main module in a listen state;

(The Distribute Software Updates Wizard's and Systems Management Control Panel's integrated main modules constantly monitor information received at their respective integrated web modules and patch module)

- processing said third request on said patch module;

(The Distribute Software Updates Wizard's and Systems Management Control Panel's integrated patch modules automatically process information received from their respective integrated main module)

- sending a first reply with a list of available updates from said patch module to said main module;

(Ref-A: Fig. 3.4, page 77: step 5; "The Distribute Software Updates Wizard stores software update source files on a specified package source share."

Ref-A: page 131: "The General tab shows the discovery data for the computer.")

- J• sending a second reply with a list of available updates from said main module to said web module; and

(Ref-A: Fig. 3.4, page 77: step 5; "The Distribute Software Updates Wizard stores software update source files on a specified package source share."

Ref-A: page 131: "The General tab shows the discovery data for the computer.")

- sending a third reply with a list of available updates from said web module to said user interface,

(Ref-A: Fig. 3.4, page 77: step 6; "The Distribute Software Updates Wizard creates and updates the necessary packages, programs, and advertisements for distributing the software updates to SMS clients." Ref-A: Fig. 3.4, page 77: step 3; "The information that the wizard displays is based on the software update inventory data that was collected during the scanning phase."

Ref-A: page 131: "The General tab shows the discovery data for the computer. The Components tab displays a list of components that are installed on the client and the status of each component.")⁷

The Applicant respectfully disagrees for the reasons set forth below.

Contrary to the Examiner's statement, nowhere does Microsoft disclose placing the web module in a listen state. In support of the Examiner's statement, the Examiner merely states "The Distribute Software Updates Wizard's and Systems Management Control Panel's integrated web modules constantly monitor information received at their respective integrated UI as well as

patch module.” First, the Examiner has not pointed to a portion of the Microsoft disclosure supporting this statement. Second, embodiments of the invention as presently claimed require that after the second request is sent, the web module is placed in a listen state without waiting for a response to the second request. With this Amendment, Claim 1 has been amended to make this distinction more clear. Specifically, Claim 1 has been amended to recite in part placing the web module in a listen state without waiting for a response to the second request.

Also contrary to the Examiner’s statement, nowhere does Microsoft disclose placing the main module in a listen state. In support of the Examiner’s statement, the Examiner merely states “The Distribute Software Updates Wizard's and Systems Management Control Panel's integrated web modules constantly monitor information received at their respective integrated UI as well as patch module.” First, the Examiner has not pointed to a portion of the Microsoft disclosure supporting this statement. Second, embodiments of the invention as presently claimed require that after the third request is sent, the main module is placed in a listen state without waiting for a response to the third request. With this Amendment, Claim 1 has been amended to make this distinction more clear. Specifically, Claim 1 has been amended to recite in part placing the main module in a listen state without waiting for a response to the third request.

Also with this Amendment, Claim 1 has been amended to recite in part processing the third request on the patch module, the processing including examining a global update repository including updates from multiple application manufacturers. (emphasis added) Nowhere does Microsoft disclose a global update repository that includes updates from *multiple* application manufacturers as required by presently amended Claim 1.

⁷ Office Action, pp. 4-8.

As each and every element as set forth in Claim 1 as presently amended is not found, either expressly or inherently described, in Microsoft, the Applicant respectfully requests the 35 U.S.C. § 102 rejection of Claim 1 based on Microsoft be withdrawn.

Dependent Claims 2-17

Claims 2-17 depend from Claim 1. Claim 1 being allowable, Claims 2-17 must also be allowable for at least the same reasons as for Claim 1.

Claim 17

Claim 17 recites:

The method of claim 1, further comprising:
validating the said requests for syntactical correctness upon receipt by a module.

The Examiner states,

... Microsoft® discloses the method of claim 1, further comprising:
• validating said requests for syntactical correctness upon receipt by a module.
(The Distribute Software Updates Wizard must inherently understand the syntax of the requests and parameterizations made at the UI in order to be functionally operable.⁸

The Applicant submits that such limitations are not inherent. The Applicant respectfully submits that such conclusory allegations regarding the alleged inherency of the teachings are improper.

According to the MPEP,⁹ an Examiner must provide a rationale or evidence tending to show inherency. The fact that a certain result or characteristic may occur or be present in the prior art is not sufficient to establish the inherency of that result or characteristic.¹⁰ Furthermore, “In relying upon the theory of inherency, the Examiner must provide a basis in fact and/or technical

⁸ Office Action, p. 11.

⁹ MPEP § 2112.

¹⁰ *In re Rijckaert*, 9 F.3d 1531, 1534, 28 USPQ2d 1955, 1957 (Fed. Cir. 1993).

reasoning to reasonably support the determination that the allegedly inherent characteristic necessarily flows from the teachings of the applied prior art.”¹¹

The Applicant respectfully suggests that the Examiner has failed to provide a basis in fact and/or technical reasoning to reasonably support the limitations of Claim 17 necessarily flows from the teachings of Microsoft. For this additional reason, the 35 U.S.C. § 102 rejection of Claim 17 is unsupported by the cited art of record and the rejection must be withdrawn.

Independent Claims 18 and 38

Claim 18 is a non-means-plus-function claim corresponding to method claim 1. Claim 38 is an *In re Beauregard* claim corresponding to method claim 1. With this Amendment, Claims 18 and 38 have been amended corresponding to the amendments made to Claim 1. Thus, the arguments made above with respect to Claim 1 apply to Claims 18 and 38 also. Claim 1 being allowable, Claims 18 and 38 must also be allowable for at least the same reasons as for Claim 1.

Dependent Claims 19-20

Claims 19-20 depend from Claim 18. Claim 18 being allowable, Claims 19-20 must also be allowable for at least the same reasons as for Claim 18.

Claims 21-37

The Examiner states:

...[I]t appears that the Applicant is attempting to invoke 35 U.S.C. 112, 6th paragraph, with the use of means-plus-function language in claims 21 – 37. However, the specification does not provide any specific physical structure(s) for the features that could be read into the claim to limit the scope of the means to perform the claimed functions. Therefore, the Examiner does not consider the specification to be adequate to invoke 35 U.S.C. 112, 6th paragraph interpretation

¹¹ *Ex parte Levy*, 17 USPQ2d 1461 (Bd. Pat. App. & Inter. 1990) (emphasis in original).

and furthermore, for the purpose of further claim analysis under 35 U.S.C. 102 and 103, The Examiner treats Claims 21-37 as computer program containing machine-readable instructions stored on a physical medium for performing method or the steps recited in the claim.¹²

The Applicant respectfully disagrees. The Examiner is referred to the application as filed, for example FIGS. 7 and 8 and the corresponding description, which clearly provides physical structure to perform the claimed functions. The Examiner is also referred to paragraph 12 of the application as filed, which states:

In accordance with the present invention, the components, process steps, and/or data structures may be implemented using various types of operating systems, computing platforms, computer programs, and/or general purpose machines. In addition, those of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that devices of a less general purpose nature, such as hardwired devices, field programmable gate arrays (FPGAs), application specific integrated circuits (ASICs), or the like, may also be used without departing from the scope and spirit of the inventive concepts disclosed herein.¹³

Claims 21-37 are means-plus-function claims. In support of the 35 U.S.C. § 102 rejection of Claims 21-37 based on Microsoft, the Examiner refers to the same portions of Microsoft used in the rejection of method claims 1-17.¹⁴ The Examiner is referred to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office document entitled “Examination Guidelines For Claims Reciting A "Means or Step Plus Function" Limitation In Accordance With 35 U.S.C § 112, 6th Paragraph” (“Guidelines”), a copy of which is submitted herewith for the Examiner’s convenience. The Guidelines state:

... Per our holding, the ‘broadest reasonable interpretation’ that an examiner may give means-plus-function language is that statutorily mandated in paragraph six. Accordingly, *the PTO may not disregard the structure disclosed in the*

¹² Office Action, p. 11.

¹³ Specification as filed, ¶ 12.

¹⁴ The rejection of claims 21-37 states “...claims 21-37 are rejected for the same reason set forth in connection to the rejection of claims 1-37 above, respectively.” The Applicant assumes the Examiner intended to refer to the rejection of claims 1-17.

specification corresponding to such language when rendering a Patentability determination ...

... [The] examiner shall interpret a § 112, 6th paragraph “means or step plus function” limitation in a claim as limited to the corresponding structure, materials or acts described in the specification and equivalents thereof in acts accordance with the following guidelines.¹⁵

The Guidelines state further:

... if a prior art reference teaches identity of function to that specified in a claim, then under Donaldson an examiner carries the initial burden of proof for showing that the prior art structure or step is the same as or equivalent to the structure, material, or acts described in the specification which has been identified as corresponding to the claimed means or step plus function.¹⁶

As Claims 21-37 of the present application are means-plus-function claims and Claims 1-17 of the present application are non-means-plus-function claims, they cannot be said to be drawn to identical subject matter. Furthermore, the Examiner has not shown for each means-plus-function claim, that the prior art structure or step is the same as or equivalent to the structure, material, or acts described in the specification which has been identified as corresponding to the claimed means or step plus function. Therefore, the Examiner has not established a *prima facie* case and the 35 U.S.C. § 102 rejection of Claims 21-37 must be withdrawn.

In view of the foregoing, it is respectfully asserted that the claims are now in condition for allowance.

Conclusion

It is believed that this Amendment places the above-identified patent application into condition for allowance. Early favorable consideration of this Amendment is earnestly solicited.

¹⁵ “Examination Guidelines For Claims Reciting A “Means or Step Plus Function” Limitation In Accordance With 35 U.S.C § 112, 6th Paragraph,” U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, <http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/pac/dapp/pdf/exmgu.pdf>, p. 1. (emphasis added)

¹⁶ Guidelines at p. 3. (emphasis in original)

If, in the opinion of the Examiner, an interview would expedite the prosecution of this application, the Examiner is invited to call the undersigned attorney at the number indicated below.

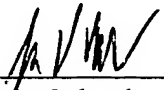
The Applicant respectfully requests that a timely Notice of Allowance be issued in this case.

Please charge any additional required fee or credit any overpayment not otherwise paid or credited to our deposit account No. 50-1698.

Respectfully submitted,

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Dated: February 14, 2008



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Examination Guidelines For Claims
Reciting A "Means or Step Plus Function" Limitation
In Accordance With 35 U.S.C § 112, 6th Paragraph

The purpose of this memo is to set forth guidelines for the examination of § 112, 6th paragraph "means or step plus function" limitations in a claim. The court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, in its en banc decision In re Donaldson 29 USPQ 2d 1845 (Fed. Cir. 1994), decided that a "means-or-step-plus-function" limitation should be interpreted in a manner different than patent examining practice has dictated for at least the last forty-two years. The Donaldson decision affects only the manner in which the scope of a "means or step plus function" limitation in accordance with § 112, 6th paragraph, is interpreted during examination. Donaldson does not directly affect the manner in which any other section of the patent statutes is interpreted or applied.

When making a determination of patentability under 35 U.S.C. §§ 102 or 103, past practice was to interpret a "means or step plus function" limitation by giving it the "broadest reasonable interpretation." Under the PTO's long-standing practice this meant interpreting such a limitation as reading on any prior art means or step which performed the function specified in the claim without regard for whether the prior art means or step was equivalent to the corresponding structure, material or acts described in the specification. However, in Donaldson the Federal Circuit stated that:

Per our holding, the "broadest reasonable interpretation" that an examiner may give means-plus-function language is that statutorily mandated in paragraph six. Accordingly, the PTO may not disregard the structure disclosed in the specification corresponding to such language when rendering a Patentability determination.¹

Thus, effective immediately, examiner shall interpret a § 112, 6th paragraph "means or step plus function" limitation in a claim as limited to the corresponding structure, materials or acts described in the specification and equivalents thereof in accordance with the following guidelines.

I. Identifying a § 112, 6th paragraph limitation

¹In re Donaldson , 29 USPQ2d 1845, 1850 (Fed. Cir. 1994).

Although there is no magic language that must appear in a claim in order for it to fall within the scope of § 112, 6th paragraph, it must be clear that the element in the claim is set forth, at least in part, by the function it performs as opposed to the specific structure, material, or acts that perform the function. Limitations that fall within the scope of § 112, 6th paragraph include:

- (1) a jet driving device so constructed and located on the rotor as to drive the rotor . . . ² ["means" unnecessary]
- (2) "printing means" and "means for printing" would have the same connotations ³
- (3) force generating means adapted to provide . . . ⁴
- (4) call cost register means, including a digital display for providing a substantially instantaneous display for . . . ⁵
- (5) reducing the coefficient of friction of the resulting film⁶ [step plus function; "step" unnecessary], and
- (6) raising the Ph of the resultant pulp to about 5.0 to precipitate . . . ⁷

²The term "device" coupled with a function is a proper definition of structure in accordance with the last paragraph of § 112. The addition of the words "jet driving" to the term "device" merely renders the latter more definite and specific. Ex parte Stanley, 121 USPQ 621 (Bd. App. 1958).

³Ex parte Klum, 159 USPQ 694 (Bd. App. 1967). However, the terms "plate" and "wing", as modifiers of the structureless term "means," specify no function to be performed, and do not fall under the last paragraph of § 112.

⁴De Graffenreid v. U.S., 20 Ct. Cl. 458, 16 USPQ2d 1321 (Ct. Cl. 1990)

⁵Intellicall Inc. v. Phonometrics Inc., 952 F.2d 1384, 21 USPQ2d 1383 (Fed. Cir. 1992).

⁶In re Roberts, 470 F.2d 1399, 176 USPQ 313 (CCPA 1973).

⁷Ex parte Zimmerley, 153 USPQ 367 (Bd. App. 1966)

In the event that it is unclear whether the claim limitation falls within the scope of §112, 6th paragraph, a rejection under §112, 2d paragraph may be appropriate.

Donaldson does not affect the holding of In re Hyatt, 708 F.2d 712, 218 USPQ 195 (Fed. Cir. 1983) to the effect that a single means claim does not comply with the enablement requirement of § 112, first paragraph. As Donaldson applies only to an interpretation of a limitation drafted to correspond to § 112, 6th paragraph, which by its terms is limited to "an element in a claim to a combination," it does not affect a limitation in a claim is not directed to a combination.

II. Examining Procedure

A. Scope of the Search and Identification of the Prior Art

As noted above, in Donaldson the Federal Circuit recognized that it is important to retain the principle that claim language should be given its broadest reasonable interpretation. This principle is important because it helps insure that the statutory presumption of validity attributed to each claim of an issued patent is warranted by the search and examination conducted by the examiner. It is also important from the standpoint that the scope of protection afforded by patents issued prior to Donaldson are not unnecessarily limited by the latest interpretation of this statutory provision. Finally, it is important from the standpoint of avoiding the necessity for a patent specification to become a catalogue of existing technology. ⁸

The Donaldson decision thus does not substantially alter examining practice and procedure relative to the scope of the search. Both before and after Donaldson, the application of a prior art reference to a means or step plus function limitation requires that the prior art element perform the identical function specified in the claim. However, if a prior art reference teaches identity of function to that specified in a claim, then under Donaldson an examiner carries the initial burden of proof for showing that the prior art structure or step is the same as or equivalent to the structure, material, or acts described in the specification which has been identified as corresponding to the claimed means or step plus function.

⁸A patent specification need not teach, and preferably omits, what is well known in the art. Hybritech Inc. v. Monoclonal Antibodies. Inc., 802 F.2d 1367, 1384, 231 USPQ 81, 94 (Fed. Cir. 1986).

The "means or step plus function" limitation should be interpreted in a manner consistent with the specification disclosure. If the specification defines what is meant by the limitation for the purposes of the claimed invention, the examiner should interpret the limitation as having the meaning. If no definition is provided, some judgment must be exercised in determining the scope of the limitation.

B. Making a prima facie case of equivalence

If the examiner finds that a prior art element performs the function specified in the claim, and is not excluded by any explicit definition provided in the specification for an equivalent, the examiner should infer from that finding that the prior art element is an equivalent, and should then conclude that the claimed limitation is anticipated by the prior art element. The burden then shifts to applicant⁹ to show that the element shown in the prior art is not an equivalent of the structure, material or acts disclosed in the application. In re Mulder, 716 F.2d 1542, 219 USPQ 189 (Fed. Cir. 1983).¹⁰ The factors to be

⁹No further analysis of equivalents is required of the examiner until applicant disagrees with the examiner's conclusion, and provides reasons why the prior art element should not be considered an equivalent.

¹⁰See also, In re Walter, 618 F.2d at 768, 205 USPQ at 407-08, (a case treating § 112, 6th paragraph, in the context of a determination of statutory subject matter and noting "If the functionally-defined disclosed means and their equivalents are so broad that they encompass any and every means for performing the recited functions . . . the burden must be placed on the applicant to demonstrate that the claims are truly drawn to specific apparatus distinct from other apparatus capable of performing the identical functions"); In re Swinehart, 439 F.2d 210, 212-13, 169 USPQ 226, 229 (C.C.P.A. 1971) (a case in which the CCPA treated as improper a rejection under § 112, 2d paragraph, of functional language, but noted that "where the Patent Office has reason to believe that a functional limitation asserted to be critical for establishing novelty in the claimed subject matter may, in fact, be an inherent characteristic of the prior art, it possesses the authority to require the applicant to prove that the subject matter shown to be in the prior art does not possess the characteristics relied on"); and In re Fitzgerald 619 F.2d 67, 205 USPQ 594 (CCPA 1980) (a case indicating that the burden of proof can be shifted to the applicant to show that the subject matter of the prior art does not possess the characteristic relied on whether the rejection is based on inherency under § 102 or obviousness under § 103).

considered when determining whether the applicant has successfully met the burden of proving that the prior art element is not equivalent to the structure, material or acts described in the applicant's specification are discussed below.

However, even where the applicant has met that burden of proof and has shown that the prior art element is not equivalent to the structure, material or acts described in the applicant's specification, the examiner must still make a §103 analysis to determine if the claimed means or step plus function is obvious from the prior art to one of ordinary skill in the art. Thus, while a finding of non equivalence prevents a prior art element from anticipating a means or step plus function limitation in a claim, it does not prevent the prior art element from rendering the claim limitation obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art.

Because the exact scope of an "equivalent" may be uncertain, it would be appropriate to apply a §102/§103 rejection where the balance of the claim limitations are anticipated by the prior art relied on.¹¹ In addition, although it is normally the best practice to rely on only the best prior art references in rejecting a claim, alternative grounds of rejection may be appropriate where the prior art shows elements that are different from each other, and different from the specific structure, material or acts described in the specification, yet perform the function specified in the claim.

C. Determining whether an applicant has met the burden of providing non-equivalence after a *prima facie* case is made

If the applicant disagrees with the inference of equivalence drawn from a prior art reference, the applicant may provide reasons why the applicant believes the prior art element should not be considered an equivalent to the specific structure, material or acts disclosed in the specification. Such reasons may include, but are not limited to: 1) teachings in the specification that particular prior art is not equivalent, 2) teaching in the prior art reference itself that may tend to show non-equivalence, or 3) Rule 132 affidavit evidence of facts tending to show non-equivalence.

When the applicant relies on teachings in applicant's own specification, the examiner must make sure that the applicant is interpreting the "means or step plus function" limitation in the

¹¹A similar approach is authorized in the case of product-by--process claim because the exact identity of the claimed product or the prior art product cannot be determined by the examiner. re Brown, 450 F.2d 531, 173 USPQ 685 (CCPA 1972).

claim in a manner which is consistent with the disclosure in the specification. If the specification defines what is meant by "equivalents" to the disclosed embodiments for the purpose of the claimed means or step plus function, the examiner should interpret the limitation as having that meaning. If no definition is provided, some judgment must be exercised in determining the scope of "equivalents." Generally, an "equivalent" is interpreted as embracing more than the specific elements described in the specification for performing the specified function,¹² but less than any element that performs the function specified in the claim.

The scope of equivalents embraced by a claim limitation is dependent on the interpretation of an "equivalent". The interpretation will vary depending on how the element is described in the supporting specification. The claim may or may not be limited to particular structure, material or acts (e.g. steps) as opposed to any and all structure, material or acts performing the claimed function, depending on how the specification treats that question.

If the disclosure is so broad as to encompass any and all structure, material or acts for performing the claimed function, the claims must be read accordingly when determining patentability. When this happens the limitation otherwise provided by "equivalents" ceases to be a limitation on the scope of the claim in that an equivalent would be any structure, material or act other than the ones described in the specification that perform the claimed function. For example, this situation will often be found in cases where (1) the claimed invention is a combination of elements, one or more of which are selected from elements that are old per se, or (2) apparatus claims are treated as indistinguishable from method claims.¹³

¹²To interpret "means plus function" limitations as limited to a particular means set forth in the specification would nullify the provisions of § 112 requiring that the limitation shall be construed to cover the structure described in the specification and equivalents thereof. D.M.I., Inc. v. Deere & Co., 755 F.2d 1570, 1574, 225 USPQ 236, 238 (Fed. Cir. 1985).

¹³See, for example, In re Meyer, 688 F.2d 789, 215 USPQ 193 (1982); In re Abele, 618 F.2d at 768, 205 USPQ at 401-08; In re Walter, 618 F.2d 758, 767, 205 USPQ 397, 406-07 (C.C.P.A. 1980); In re Maucorps, 609 F.2d 481, 203 USPQ 812 (C.C.P.A. 1979); In re Johnson, 589 F.2d, 1070, 200 USPQ 199 (C.C.P.A. 1978); and In re Freeman, 573 F.2d at 1246, 197 USPQ at 471.

On the other end of the spectrum, the "equivalents" limitation as applied to a claim may also operate to constrict the claim scope to the point of covering virtually only the disclosed embodiments. This can happen in circumstances where the specification describes the invention only in the context of a specific structure, material or act that is used to perform the function specified in the claim.

When deciding whether an applicant has met the burden of proof with respect to showing non-equivalence of a prior art element that performs the claimed function, the following factors may be considered. First, unless an element performs the identical function specified in the claim, it cannot be a equivalent for the purpose of §112, 6th paragraph. ¹⁴

Second, while there is no litmus test for an "equivalent" that can be applied with absolute certainty and predictability, there are several indicia that are sufficient to support a conclusion that one element is or is not an "equivalent" of a different element in the context of § 112, 6th paragraph. Among the indicia that will support a conclusion that one element is or is not an equivalent of another are:

- 1) Whether the prior art element performs the function specified in the claim in substantially the same results as the corresponding element disclosed in the specification. ¹⁵
- 2) Whether a person of ordinary skill in the art would have recognized the interchangeability of the element shown in the prior art for the corresponding element disclosed in the specification. ¹⁶

¹⁴Pennwalt Corp. v. Durand-Wayland Inc . 833 F.2d 931, 4 USPQ2d 1737 (Fed. Cir. 1987), cert. denied , 484 U.S. 961 (1988).

¹⁵Lockheed Aircraft Corporation v. United States , 193 USPQ 449, 461 (Ct. Cl. 1977). Graver Tank concepts of equivalents are relevant to any "equivalents" determination. Polumbo v. Don-Joy Co., 762 F.2d 696, 975, n. 4, 226 USPQ 5, 8-9, n. 4 (Fed. Cir. 1985).

¹⁶Lockheed Aircraft Corporation v. United States , 193 USPQ 449, 461 (Ct. Cl. 1977). Data Line Corp. v. Micro Technologies. Inc ., 813 F.2d 1196, 1 USPQ2d 2052 (Fed. Cir. 1987).

- 3) Whether the prior art element is a structural equivalent of the corresponding element disclosed in the specification being examined.¹⁷ That is, the prior art element performs the function specified in the claim in substantially the same manner as the function is performed by the corresponding element described in the specification.
- 4) Whether the structure, material or acts disclosed in the specification represents an insubstantial change which adds nothing of significance to the prior art element. 18

These examples are not intended to be an exhaustive list of the indicia that would support a finding that one element is or is not an equivalent of another element for the purposes of § 112, 6th paragraph. A finding according to any of the above examples would represent a sufficient, but not the only possible, basis to support a conclusion that an element is or is not an equivalent. There could be other indicia that also would support the conclusion.

In determining whether arguments or Rule 132 evidence presented by an applicant are persuasive that the element shown in the prior art is not an equivalent, the examiner should consider and weigh as many of the above-indicated or other indicia as are presented by applicant, and should determine whether, on balance, the applicant has met the burden of proof to show non-equivalence. However, under no circumstance should an examiner accept as persuasive a bare statement or opinion that the element shown in the prior art is not an equivalent embraced by the claim limitation. Moreover, if an applicant argues that the "means" or "step" plus function language in a claim is limited to certain specific structural or additional functional characteristics (as opposed to "equivalents" thereof) where the specification does not describe the invention as being only those specific characteristics, the claim should not be allowed until the claim is amended to recite those specific structural or additional functional characteristics. 19

¹⁷In re Bond, 910 F.2d 831, 15 USPQ2d 1566 (Fed. Cir. 1990).

¹⁸Valmont Industries Inc. v. Reinke Manufacturing Co. Inc., 983 F.2d 1039, 25 USPQ2d 1451 (Fed. Cir. 1993).

¹⁹Otherwise, a claim could be allowed having broad functional language which in reality is limited to only the specific structure or steps disclosed in the specification. This would be

Finally, as in the past, applicant has the opportunity during proceedings before the Office to amend the claims so that the claimed invention meets all the statutory criteria for patentability. An applicant may choose to amend the claim by further limiting the function so that there is no longer identity of function with that taught by the prior art element, or the applicant may choose to replace the claimed means plus function limitation with specific structure material or acts that are not described in the prior art.

D. Related issues under Section 112 first or second paragraphs

The Donaldson decision may create some uncertainty as to what applicant regards as the invention. If this issue arises, it should be addressed in a rejection under §112, 2d paragraph. While § 112, 6th paragraph permits a particular form of claim limitation, it can not be read as creating an exception either to the description, enablement or best mode requirements of the 1st paragraph or the definiteness requirement of the 2d paragraph of § 112. In re Knowlton, 481 F.2d 1357, 178 USPQ 486 (CCPA 1973). If a "means or step plus function" limitation recited in a claim is not supported by corresponding structure, material or acts in the specification disclosure, the following rejections should be considered: (1) under § 112, 1st paragraph, as not being supported by an enabling disclosure because the person skilled in the art would not know how to make and use the invention without a description of elements to perform the function; ²⁰ (2) under § 112, 2d paragraph, as being indefinite because the element or step is not defined in the specification by corresponding structure, material or acts; (3) under §§ 102 or 103 where the prior art anticipates or renders obvious the claimed subject matter including the means or step that performs the function specified in the claim. (Theory: since there is no corresponding structure, etc. in the specification to limit the means or step plus function limitation, an equivalent is any element that performs the specified function).

contrary to public policy of granting patents which provide adequate notice to the public as to a claim's true scope.

²⁰The description of an apparatus with block diagrams describing the function, but not the structure, of the apparatus is not fatal under the enablement requirement of § 112, 1st paragraph, as long as the structure is conventional and can be determined without an undue amount of experimentation. In re Ghiron, 442 F. 2d 985, 991,169 USPQ 723, 727 (CCPA 1971)

III. Avoid confusion with the doctrine of equivalents

An "equivalent" for the purposes of § 112, 6th paragraph, should not be confused with the doctrine of equivalents. The doctrine of equivalents, most often associated with Graver Tank & Mfg. Co. v. Linde Air Products 339 U.S. 605, 85 USPQ 328 (1950), is sometimes applied to do equity among the parties before the court in an infringement action involving an issued patent. The doctrine typically involves a three-part inquiry - whether an accused device performs substantially the same function, in substantially the same way, to obtain substantially the same result as the claimed invention.

Section § 112, 6th paragraph limits the scope of the broad language of "means or step plus function" limitations, in a claim to a combination, to the structures, materials and acts described in the specification and equivalents thereof. The doctrine of equivalents equitable expands exclusive patent rights beyond the literal scope of a claim. ²¹ Accordingly, decisions involving the doctrine of equivalents should not unduly influence a determination under § 112, 6th paragraph during ex parte examination.

²¹Valmont Industries Inc., Reinke Manufacturing Co., Ind., 983 F.2d 1039, 1043, 1044, 25 USPQ2d 1451, 1455 (Fed. Cir. 1993).